

Sterner Stuff

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Summary: repost with editing Post COTW Ray V., Thatcher and a wounded Fraser are stranded in a remote area. Violence, some language.

Sterner Stuff

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\_This story takes place after COTW with some differences: Vecchio has stayed on in Chicago and has teamed up with Kowalski and Fraser who have returned from their journey, and Inspector Thatcher still runs the show at the consulate.\_

Sterner Stuff

\_Fraser has arranged for Vecchio to accompany him and Thatcher on a routine search of a wilderness area believed to be used by drug dealers. Fraser is hoping to give Ray the camping trip that went awry when their plane crashed. As this drug ring is working both sides of the border, Thatcher agreed.....\_

"Run!" Inspector Thatcher's voice echoed over the rocks as soon as the first gunshots rang out. "Run for the horses!" She sprinted off toward the stand of trees where the three mounts were tethered, Vecchio and Fraser right behind her. More shots ricocheted off the boulders that littered the narrow pass. Vecchio stopped behind an outcropping and pulled his weapon.

"Go on! I'll cover you," he yelled to the Mounties.

Fraser skidded to a halt and backtracked toward his friend, dodging bullets as he went. "Ray, I think there is a time to fight and a time

to flee. We are outnumbered by who knows how many and severely outgunned."

Vecchio grimaced as he got off the last shot in his clip and ducked behind the rock to reload. "We wouldn't be if you Mounties weren't so damned stubborn about carrying guns."

"I'm sorry, Ray, I didn't quite catch that. What did you say?"

Vecchio slammed the clip home and turned back to face the way they'd come. "Nothing. I thought I told you to get the hell out of here!"

"Actually you said 'go on' but that's neither here nor there. Ray, we all need to, as you so succinctly put it, 'get the hell out of here'." The two men ducked as another hail of gunfire assaulted them.

"You might have a point there, Benny," Vecchio mumbled. "Last one to the horses is a rotten egg." He fired off a few last shots for good measure then ran up the hill behind the constable.

At the trees, Inspector Thatcher had already untied the horses and was waiting for the two men. "What took you so long?" she yelled, directing her anger at Fraser. "I gave you a direct order, Constable!"

"It's my fault, Inspector!" growled Vecchio.

Thatcher turned on the detective. "Constable Fraser isn't a child, Detective Vecchio!"

"Then stop treating him like one," countered Ray, trying to calm his rearing mount.

"Perhaps we should continue this discussion at another time." Fraser calmly interrupted the building argument. "After we get out of here." He looked down the trail at the rapidly approaching group. "Right now we have very little time and a lot of company coming."

Thatcher was incensed. It wasn't bad enough she was being shot at on a routine site search, but now her subordinate was issuing commands. She didn't care if he was right, no one ordered her around! "See here, Constable....."

"Get down!" The urgency in Fraser's voice and his body throwing her to the ground stopped her tirade. Vecchio started shooting again.

"They're too close for comfort, Benny! Let's go!" He awkwardly mounted his horse, still trying to aim at their attackers.

Inspector Thatcher jumped up and mounted her horse. "Fraser, come on! Fraser!" Fraser eased up from the ground onto his hands and knees. "Fraser, what's taking you so long?"

Fraser pulled himself up using the reins as a hoist and lurched into the saddle. "I ... just had the wind....knocked out of me," he gasped.

"Follow me!" Thatcher took off at a blinding gallop. They rode up the over the hill and onto the flat, rocky plain above.

"Where are we going?" yelled Vecchio, as he struggled to stay upright.

"She's headed for the cave we saw yesterday," Fraser yelled over his shoulder.

"What cave? I don't remember any cave?" It was hard for Vecchio to hear over the pounding of the hooves and the wind in his ears. Did Fraser really say "cave"?

"Just follow." It must have been a trick of the wind. Fraser's voice sounded a little strained.

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"Did we lose 'em, do ya' think?" panted Vecchio as they pulled up by a small opening in the rocks, surrounded by pine trees, with a small stream running by.

"I hope so for the horses sake. Four hours of hard riding has done them in. It's almost dark. We'd better stop here for the night, gentlemen. Water and rub them down, Constable. I'll gather firewood and check our provisions. Give me the saddlebags." Thatcher pulled her saddlebags off her horse and took the offered saddlebags from Fraser. She dumped them at the mouth of the cave and headed off into the surrounding forest.

Vecchio watched her go. "'I'll gather firewood and check the provisions'," he mocked. "I'll check her provisions, alright. See what I get for coming along? Some routine site search. 'It'll be boring' you said. 'Just spending a couple of days looking for evidence in the mountains', you said." Vecchio turned toward his friend. "Can you believe..?" Vecchio trailed off as he watched Fraser struggle with the Inspector's saddle. He pulled it off the horse and stumbled under the weight. Vecchio rushed to his side to steady him. "Here, let me help ya', Benny. Are you okay?" He looked anxiously into the Mountie's face.

"I guess I'm a little winded is all."

Vecchio looked at him in disbelief. "You? Winded? Right. What's wrong?"

"Fraser, it's getting cold. Remember the horses? What are you waiting for, Christmas?" Inspector Thatcher returned with an armload of wood. "I guess if you want something done right..." she dropped the wood and rubbed down the unsaddled horse with it's blanket.

"Gee, Inspector, thanks for pitching in," grumbled Vecchio as he unbuckled the saddle on Fraser's horse. He pulled it off, letting gravity take over once it cleared the animal's back. It thumped on the ground. Vecchio stretched, cradling his lower back in his hands. The sun was setting a glorious burst of light. He looked at it for a moment, always amazed at what the sun looked like outside the confines of the city.

"Some vacation. Back to work," he muttered and he bent back down to move the saddle into the cave. "What the hell...?" Something wet and dark glistened on the saddle. He bent down to get a closer look. The sun shone a final ray on the ground by his feet, illuminating the saddle. Vecchio cursed softly, realizing what he was looking at. Blood. He took in the sight with a growing sense of disbelief. He cursed again, this time anger getting the better of him. He turned on Fraser, ready to explode. "Fraser!" But the words died in his mouth as looked at the Mountie's ashen face and rushed forward to catch his friend before he hit the ground.

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"How is he? How bad is it?" Vecchio hovered over Thatcher's shoulder looking down at the unconscious Fraser.

"I don't know, yet. I have to get to it first." She unbuttoned Fraser's blood soaked shirt and eased it open. She started to pull it out of the top of his jeans. Fraser moaned. The wound was on Fraser's left side, right above his waist. Thatcher needed to get to it so she undid his pants and unzipped them halfway, giving her more room to maneuver. "This is gonna hurt," she muttered, more to herself than to anyone else, and pulled the clothes free of the wound. Fraser moaned again and twisted away in pain. A fresh flow of blood raced from his side. "I need a cloth, something, anything!" she cried, pressing her hands into his flesh, trying to staunch the bleeding. Vecchio peeled off his shirt and then his t-shirt, handing the t-shirt to her. She bunched it up and pressed it into the wound, putting all her weight behind it. Fraser cried out in pain and opened his eyes.

"It's okay, Benny, it's okay." Ray took Fraser's hand. "You shoulda told us you were shot, Benny," he scolded gently.

"I didn't want to slow us down." Fraser's voice cracked with pain as Thatcher continued to apply pressure. "I didn't want you to get hurt. You were only out here with us because we never got to finish our camping trip."

Ray laughed. "Yeah, the plane crash kinda upset our plans, didn't it. How come every time I go somewhere with you, we end up like this."

"Look on the bright side, Ray, at least I'm not blind." He clenched his teeth as Thatcher removed the soaked t-shirt to check the wound.

"Well?"

"I don't think it hit any major organ, it's too far over to the side. But it's deep. And - help me lift him, Detective." They eased Fraser upright so she could remove his shirt. "The bullet's still in there." Ray and Thatcher gently eased back down onto the cave floor. His jaw was tightened against the pain and sweat beaded his forehead.

"What do we do know?" Vecchio asked.

"Keep pressure on it, for the moment. The bleeding has eased but he's lost a lot of blood already. I'll get the saddlebags and get the horses secured."

"The horses! The damn horses?" Ray Vecchio had had enough. Every time Fraser'd been hurt, she could care less and now, with it right in her face, she was worried about animals. "He's been shot and he's bleeding and you're worried about the horses!? You really are one cold hearted bitch aren't you?"

"Ray, stop it."

"How dare you! I'm cold hearted? I'm not the one who abandoned my best friend without so much as a word!"

"Inspector, please.."

"I'm not the one who treats him like crap!"

"Both of you stop it!" The two combatants looked down at Fraser, startled. "Please. Don't argue like this, it's not getting anyone anywhere. Please. Just settle down."

Inspector Thatcher took a deep breath and stood. "As I was saying, I'll see to the horses. If you'll excuse me." She left the cave and vanished into the growing dark outside.

Ray looked down at his friend, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Benny. She just gets to me, you know?"

"I know," Fraser sighed. "Ray, we need the horses. Without them, we're on foot and I'm not up to walking right now."

"Yeah. I guess you got a point there." Vecchio grabbed his saddlebag and pulled out another t-shirt. He pushed it against the wound which had begun to bleed more heavily again. Fraser stifled a moan and closed his eyes tight. There was no noise but the soft sounds of Inspector Thatcher getting the horses settled for the night.

"Benny." Ray's voice seemed to come from a great distance, but when Fraser opened his eyes, Ray was still next to him. "I had to go, Benny. I couldn't leave word, ya know. It happened too fast. I wanted to, believe me. You know me, Benny. You know I would've left word if I could." He looked at his Fraser.

"I know, Ray. I know." His eyes started to close. "I'm so tired, Ray." He sighed deeply.

Ray panicked. "Oh, no you don't, Benny!" He slapped him lightly on the cheeks. "Benny! Wake up! Don't you dare go to sleep on me, Benny."

Fraser opened his eyes. "I'm cold, Ray."

"Gotcha, buddy. I'll build a nice fire and you'll warm up in no time. Just don't go to sleep. Here, hold this." He picked up Fraser's hand and placed it over the t-shirt. Then he grabbed some matches out of his saddlebag and scooped out a circle in the dirt floor of the cave. "Just like you taught me," he smiled at his friend.

"Just like I taught you," came the smiled response.

"I need to get firewood, stay here okay?"

"I'll try."

"Right." Vecchio got up and went to the mouth of the cave. He found the pile of wood and started to pick it up.

"What are you doing?" Inspector Thatcher came out of the dark, her hands on her hips in a defiant stance.

"He's cold. I'm getting firewood."

"Oh." She dropped her hands. "Look, detective, I....."

"We need the horses. I know. Can I go now?"

"Fine," she growled. "I'll be right in."

Vecchio brought the wood into the cave and stacked some in the center of the firepit. "You still with me, Bento?" he asked, lighting a match.

"I'm here.....Talk to me Ray."

"Talk about what?"

"I don't know. Anything. What was it like? Being so far undercover?"

Vecchio hesitated. He'd always thought about it but never put it into words. "It was like.. like... drowning. I could see the surface, but I couldn't rise up to it." He struggled for the right words. He didn't see Thatcher come quietly into the cave. She leaned against the wall, listening.

"I don't know how you did it, Ray." Fraser's statement made Ray laugh.

"You know I wanted to be an actor when I was a kid. Like James Dean or Cary Grant. I just looked at it like acting. I had to pretend to be something so far against what I really am. I guess you could say it was the ultimate role. You'da been proud of me, Benny."

"I am proud of you, Ray. I always have been."

Ray looked at his friend in the growing firelight.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Inspector Thatcher made a noise and stepped into the light. She knelt by the saddlebags and began to rummage through them. "I think there's a first aid kit here somewhere. Ah, here it is. Let's see what we have." She began to take inventory of the contents of a small medical kit. Fraser coughed and she turned to him quickly. "Are you alright?" She crossed over to him.

Fraser licked his dry lips. "I'm thirsty." Thatcher reached for the canteen and held it to his lips. Fraser drank deeply and leaned back. "Thank you kindly," he whispered.

"Sure thing, Constable. Are you warm enough?" Fraser didn't answer. "Fraser?" Ray could hear the concern in Thatcher's voice.

"What is it?" he asked, coming over from the fire. "Benny?" Ray shook him gently. "You aren't supposed to go to sleep yet."

Thatcher slapped his cheek lightly, then rested her hand on his face. She moved it to his forehead and looked at Vecchio. "He's unconscious. And he's burning up."

"What do we do?"

Thatcher looked down at Fraser then back at Vecchio. "We have to remove the bullet."

"You have got to be kidding. Take the bullet out? We aren't qualified to do that, we could kill him!"

"He'll die if we don't."

"I can take a horse and go for help. Get a doctor, a helicopter, anything."

"He could die before you get back. Look, Detective, it's not my choice, it's the only choice."

Ray looked down at his friend. Sweat stood out on the Mountie's forehead, the fever rising as his body fought against the invading bullet. He knew there was no choice, he just hated the thought of causing his friend more pain, and he knew there would be pain. No morphine, no pain killers of any kind. "Alright," he heard himself say. "What you want me to do?"

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"I've boiled the scissors, the needle and the thread. What else?" Ray watched the inspector wash her hands in the water they'd heated over the fire.

"Did you get all the spare shirts out of the bags?"

"Yes. All the cotton ones, just like you asked."

"You tore them into strips?"

"You saw me do it!" Ray thought he had never met a more exasperating person in his life. Her next words surprised him.

"I'm sorry, Detective."

"Considering the circumstances, don't you think you should call him Ray?" Ray and Thatcher looked down and saw Fraser looking up at them.

"Oh, God, Benny, you shouldn't be awake. Not now," groaned Ray.

"It's alright Ray. I knew it had to be done." Fraser closed his eyes again. Ray could see he was concentrating.

"Well, \_ Ray\_, I've never done this before and I'm a little nervous. And despite what you think of me, I do like Fraser. So let's just get this over with and get some rest ourselves, okay? Okay." She grasped the scissors in her hand. They shook. She saw it and put them down again.

"You can do it." Fraser was looking at her again. "I trust you."

Thatcher met his eyes for long moment. "Understood." She picked up the scissors again. "Hold him, will you Ray? Here goes." She reached the scissors into the open wound and moved them around, searching for the bullet. Fraser's face was a mask of pain but he didn't cry out. Ray knew he must be in agony and he gripped Fraser's arms all the harder, willing him to feel the pain in his arms, not in his side.

"I've got it," Thatcher announced. At last she pulled the bullet from the wound and dropped the scissors with a sigh. "It's out," she sighed.

Ray released his hold on Fraser's arms and rested his head on his knees. Fraser breathed deeply, willing himself to relax, to let go of the pain. Thatcher sewed the wound shut with the needle and thread from the medical kit and bound it tightly with strips of shirt. "Try and sleep," she said quietly. "I'm going to go wash up in the stream."

She left the cave abruptly, leaving Ray to make sure Fraser was comfortable. He covered him with the blankets from the saddlebags and put a rolled up shirt under his head. In just a few moments, Fraser was asleep, exhausted by the ordeal. Ray leaned back against the wall of the cave and tried to release the stress in his shoulders. He stretched his back and then abruptly bolted upright when he heard an unmistakable noise from outside the cave. He rushed out and found the inspector, retching by the stream.

"Inspector?" he called. She looked up and he could see tears streaming down her face. Then she was overcome with another bout of heaving and leaned back toward the ground. Ray ran back into the cave and returned with some strips of cloth. He wet them in the cold water of the stream and held one against her neck. The other he offered her for her face.

"Thanks" she croaked. "It's just that... I mean I ..... how could I just let him...?" Ray just reached out his arms and held her. She broke down sobbing and he rubbed her back. He knew how she felt. He would have done the same. After a few minutes, she calmed down and pulled away from him. "Thanks," she said again.

"No problem." Ray smiled. "You did good."

"I was so scared. Is he asleep?"

"Yes. And we should get some rest, too. Don't you think?"

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"Meg. Meg." She heard the call from deep in her dreams. At first a



part of her dreams then more real. She knew Fraser needed her. She went to him.

"What is it?" His eyes were open and he looked at her, but she could see the fevered brightness in them. She knew he was only half there, the other half was dreaming somewhere.

"I can't forget, Meg, even though you said I should."

"Forget what, Fraser?"

"The train. I can't forget the train." Meg Thatcher knew where he was. He was back on the train where they had kissed. She had told him to forget it happened, even though she never could. How could one ever forget a kiss like that? He hadn't. She's known that long ago but had lied to herself all this time.... "I can't forget either, Ben."

"Meg!" His cry brought her back. She saw his eyes were closed and he was somewhere else, somewhere new. "Get down!" He was back to this afternoon. When he pushed her out of the way of the gunman. When he took a bullet meant for her. She didn't know how she knew, she just did.

"Oh, Ben. My Ben," she started to cry, softly.

"Meg." His eyes were on her again. "Kiss me." She lowered her cool lips to his warm ones. Drowning. Like Ray, she was drowning, but this was wonderful. She lost herself in the kiss until Fraser lost consciousness again. She never noticed the eyes on her from the other side of the cave, nor saw the look of disbelief on Ray's face turn to one of \*how could I have been so blind\*. She didn't see Ray smile and turn toward the wall, nor did she see him close his eyes in peaceful sleep.

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It seemed to Ray as if he had only been asleep moments when he felt someone shake him.

"Ray. Ray! Wake up please, I need your help! Ray!" Meg Thatcher sounded terrified. Ray awoke with a start and sat up. "What is it, what's wrong?"

She bit her lower lip as if she didn't want to speak. "Meg?" Ray's question started tears flowing down her face. "It's Ben, I mean Fraser. I can't stop the bleeding."

"What do you mean? I thought it was okay?"

"He was delirious. He was thrashing around. I checked the bandage. The stitches are torn and he's bleeding and I can't stop it."

"Have you ....."

"I've tried everything. Ray, I can only think of one thing to do." The distress in her face was acute. She'd already pulled a bullet from him, what could be worse? "What's that?"

"We have to stop the bleeding Ray. He's lost so much blood. He's so

weak. We have to stop it!"

She was getting hysterical. This was something to see, cold Inspector Thatcher getting hysterical. Part of Ray made a note to enjoy the memory of this later, but now he shook her. "Calm down! What do we have to do?"

Thatcher swallowed, then wiped her eyes. "We have to cauterize the wound."

Ray stared at her, just stared and tried to comprehend what he had just heard. "You mean cauterize as in cauterize?"

"I'm afraid so." Her look implored him. He knew this was tearing her up. Ray got up and went to Fraser. He was pale, very pale, and he was still feverish. Ray lifted the bandage and saw the blood staining the cloth underneath. A lot of blood. He lifted the cloth and saw the wound was bleeding heavily. His friend was dying. Ray knew it as certain as he knew his own name. "What do I have to do?"

"You? But, I ..."

"You took out the bullet and threw up. If you do this, you'll be a basket case. Besides, it's my turn to do the dirty work, so to speak. What do I have to do?"

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Ray Vecchio sat in the dark, breathing heavily in the cold, night air. The deed was done and bleeding stopped but he could still see the white hot knife in his hand, still smell the burning flesh, still hear Fraser's scream of agony echoing in his head. He knew he would hear it for the rest of his life. His eyes closed and he relived it again.

"Just put the knife flat part down on the wound. I'll keep the bandage on it until you're ready. Hold it there for a few seconds. You need to seal the wound." The inspector's voice shook as she spoke. \*

\*Ray took the knife from the fire and saw that it was glowing. "Is it ready?" \*

\*Meg looked at the knife. "Yes. Are you sure you can do this, Ray?" \*

\*Ray nodded and approached Fraser. He looked like death; his breathing shallow, his face sweaty and pale. Ray positioned the knife over Meg's hand and took a breath. He nodded. She lifted the cloth. Ray plunged the hot knife down onto Fraser's side. Fraser screamed and tried to sit up, bucking against Meg who had thrown herself on top of his chest just before the knife came down. "Not yet, not yet!" yelled Meg as she saw the decision to remove the knife in Ray's eyes. Ray looked at her, his face tormented. "How long?" he cried over Fraser's screams. Meg seemed to wait an eternity. "Now, Ray." Ray pulled the knife away. Fraser went suddenly limp in Meg's tight embrace and she was thrown to the ground. Ray looked down and saw the wicked looking welt across Fraser's side. He ran out of the cave and into breaking dawn.\*

"Ray." He heard her come up behind him. "Ray, we did what we had to do." There were tears in her voice. "He would have bled to death, Ray. He would have done the same thing."

"I was just sitting here thinking," Ray said quietly. "A long time ago, when I first met Fraser, I said something about how he always knows the right thing to do, always makes the hard things look easy, always seemed so strong. He said that I was made of sterner stuff than I supposed and that I was the one who was strong. He said I'd find out some day. I thought about that while I was undercover. I thought maybe that's what he meant. Now I know different. Now I know what he was talking about."

"How do you mean?"

"When you can do that to someone, cause them terrible pain, to save them. That's what he meant. I mean, if you had asked me to do this five years ago, I'dve told you to take a hike to the looney bin. But I did it today, now. And all because I knew that he would have done the same. Isn't that funny."

"I'm not sure I understand, Ray." Meg wanted to understand, but he could hear in her voice that she couldn't.

"You are like him, that's why. You can't understand what's already a part of you. I'd like to be alone, if that's okay. I'll be in soon."

Thatcher left him and returned to the cave. She checked on Fraser. There was no drastic change but she could see that his breathing had eased and his fever was down a little. Not much, but some. She rinsed the bloody cloths in the stream and put cold compresses on Fraser's forehead and side. She bathed him as best she could without removing his clothes. Then she curled up next to him and slept. Ray found them like that sometime later. He covered them with another blanket, got one for himself, and slept.

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"What do you call this thing, again?" Ray asked.

"A travois, Ray." Fraser replied as Thatcher covered him with blankets and tightened the straps. "It's a form of sledge designed by the North American Plains Indians."

"Sledge? What's this thing got to do with a hammer?" Ray checked the two poles that were secured to either side of Fraser's horse.

"Not that kind of sledge, Ray. A sledge is like a sled. Or in this case, more like a litter. The name comes from the French word 'travail' meaning work or load. In any case...."

"Are you ready, Detective?" Thatcher interrupted with smile for Ray.

"Yeah. Let's get out of here. I've had enough vacation for awhile."

"But Ray, you've had five days of rest and relaxation," Fraser rebuked.

"You had five days of rest, Benny. I spent the last week helping the inspector here build this travvy thing."

"Travois, Ray," Fraser corrected.

"Whatever, I'm ready for the city where we have good old fashioned ambulances." He mounted up and followed along behind Thatcher who rode her own horse and led Fraser's, which was hooked up to the rope and branch litter that carried him.

"As I was saying, Ray," began Fraser "the travois was named by the French Canadians....."

Ray let him talk. It was good to hear his voice, strong and sure echoing among the pines, even though he still had no idea what Fraser was talking about. Ray just smiled and nodded in the appropriate places.

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## Epilogue

"So Ray, you're serious about Fraser and the Ice Queen? They're really an item?"

"I wouldn't lie about a thing like that, Kowalski. It's too bizarre. But I wouldn't call them an item exactly since neither one of them wants to admit it to the other."

Kowalski made a derisive noise. "Mounties." He rolled his eyes. "So what do we do about it, Ray?"

"Well, Ray, I have an idea....."

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"Constable, could I see you for a moment." Inspector Thatcher called out her open door to Fraser as he walked by her office.

"Yes sir?"

"They've apprehended the gunmen who shot at us. They're part of the drug ring we were investigating."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir." He waited a moment. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"Fraser, I... that is to say.... Um... Oh, never mind. Dismissed, Constable."

"Yes sir." Fraser turned to go. "Sir?"

"What is it, Fraser?"

"Nothing. Good night."

"Goodnight."

End  
file.